

DOES ATF'S NATIONAL TRACING CENTER WORK?

Here are the facts.

OCTOBER 2026

HOW TRACING WORKS

When a firearm is recovered at a crime scene, investigators submit a trace request to ATF's National Tracing Center. Based on the markings on the firearm, NTC contacts the manufacturer or importer and begins to trace the chain of custody to the last known retail purchaser, often within hours. That information becomes an investigative lead: a name, a location, a connection to other crimes. In urgent cases like active shooters or mass casualty events, NTC operates around the clock.

THE NUMBERS

NTC supports both domestic and international law enforcement partners, processing over 600,000 unique requests per year. Not all trace requests result in leads investigators can use to solve violent crimes. But roughly 75% result in a lead that law enforcement can use to solve crimes. Traces are critical in solving thousands of crimes per year across the country.

TRACING IN ACTION

Highland Park, Illinois — July 2022

When a gunman opened fire on an Independence Day parade crowd, killing 7 and injuring nearly 50, ATF Chicago spearheaded an urgent trace of the firearm left at the scene. The trace identified Robert Crimo III as the original purchaser — an unknown at the time. Within hours, authorities located and arrested him. On April 24, 2025, Crimo was sentenced to life in prison.

Nashville, Tennessee — March 2023

After a shooter killed three children and three staff members at The Covenant School, ATF conducted emergency traces on all firearms recovered. The traces identified the FFLs where the shooter purchased the weapons. ATF agents and detectives went to those dealers that same morning to review surveillance footage and conduct interviews — confirming the shooter acted alone. That determination allowed investigators to immediately focus on motive rather than continuing to search for additional threats.

Butler, Pennsylvania: July 2024

ATF Pittsburgh agents responded to the assassination attempt on President Donald Trump. An emergency trace of the AR-style rifle recovered at the scene identified the original purchaser in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania. En route to that interview, ATF's Crime Gun Intelligence Group provided additional intelligence that allowed ATF to identify the shooter (Thomas Matthew Crooks) to law enforcement partners at the command post.

Atlanta, Georgia — September 2023

After an FFL flagged suspicious bulk purchases of military-grade civilian weapons by young Hispanic males paying cash, firearm tracing identified additional dealers selling the same style of firearms and linked them to additional straw purchasers. Approximately 116 firearms were traced over the course of the investigation. The trail led to a criminal organization smuggling firearms into Mexico for cartel use. Nine defendants were charged; five are already serving federal prison sentences. The head of the organization — a Mexican national directing the operation from inside a Georgia state prison — was identified and charged.

LA Mass Shooting (Huu Can Tran) — January 2023

On January 21, 2023, the largest mass shooting in Los Angeles County history left eleven people dead and nine injured before the suspect fled. A firearm recovered at the scene returned no results in California's system. Alhambra PD contacted ATF, who immediately conducted an urgent trace, identifying the suspect and matching him to a vehicle registered in his name. The following day, that vehicle — and the suspect — was located in Torrance. The suspect died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound during a standoff with police.

BOTTOM LINE

ATF's National Tracing Center works. It identifies shooters within hours of mass casualty events. It dismantles trafficking networks moving weapons to cartels and foreign criminal organizations. It gives investigators the lead they need when no other lead exists.

99 New York Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20226 | www.atf.gov